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ABSTRACT

The rationale behind the approach taken for an academic writing course, "Communicate in Writing: the English of Academic Study," is discussed. The first step was to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of specimens of appropriate texts in functional terms. This analysis was made in order to identify the most frequently occurring functions which the course would then teach. It would also indicate ways in which these functions are characteristically sequenced to produce coherent discourse. The requirements were two: the specification of a set of ranks, and the parameters for the analysis. Two distinct parameters, the communicative and the rhetorical, yield three possible approaches to the design; the third is a combination of the communicative and the rhetorical. Which of these three approaches is appropriate depends on the specific aims of the course. The third was judged suitable to the requirements of the pre-sessional writing course. The validity of the third approach rests on the assumption that the characteristic sequences of communicative functions can be identified for specific rhetorical types and discourse positions. Two other criteria were kept in mind: sequencing potential and internal surrender value. (CFM)

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COMMUNICATIVE SYLLABUS DESIGN FOR WRITTEN ENGLISH

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Communicative Syllabus Design for Written English

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Introduction

The work which provided the stimulus for this discussion was the preparation of an academic writing course to be used as part of a pre-sessional programme organised by the Centre for Applied Language Studies at the University of Reading. So far Part 1 of this course, which is called 'Communicate in Writing : the English of Academic Study', has been produced and is at present being used by students in Reading. The aim of this paper is primarily descriptive : to present the rationale behind the approach taken for this course, focusing attention on problems of general interest to those concerned with writing course design.

Section 1

The initial strategy adopted as a prelude to course design was to attempt to characterize specimens of appropriate texts in functional terms - appropriate texts in this case being examples of descriptive and argumentative prose taken from the large variety of disciplines which the course participants would eventually be studying. Such analyses would, it was hoped, identify the most frequently occurring functions, which the course would then teach. It would also indicate ways in which these functions are characteristically sequenced to produce coherent discourse.

It soon became clear, however, that such a strategy could not succeed without reference to a theoretical framework. In the absence of such a framework a plethora of labels may be applied, in a quite arbitrary and unrevealing way, to describe the function of any given element of discourse. Something like Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) analysis of classroom discourse, but directed to academic prose, would be required if the texts were to be approached in a principled way. Unfortunately time did not permit nearly so elaborate an analysis, and the approach adopted was thus inevitably makeshift. The following remarks are observations on what a framework can be expected to provide, and how it might be developed.

One obvious theoretical requirement is the specification of a set of ranks at which the analysis would operate. The need for such a specification in functional analyses has been noted by others (for example in Candlin 1976) and will not be discussed here, except to observe that the functional inventories already in existence do not seem to have been drawn up with any one rank consistently in mind. The categories found in van Ek's Threshold Level (1975) for example, appear to associate themselves with elements of discourse varying very considerably in size - a fact which in our experience at the Centre severely restricts the pedagogic utility of that document as the basis for general course design. In the specific area of formal written English attempts have been made to define certain units of discourse, examples being Lackstrom et al's 'conceptual paragraphs' and Kaplan's (1975) 'discourse blocs'. But so far the approaches have been piecemeal and such units do not take their place within fully worked-out models.

A theoretical framework would also specify the parameters along which functional analysis would proceed. Others, again, have noted the need for this, and despite the existence of theoretical models such as Halliday's, with his parameters of 'ideational', 'textual' and 'interpersonal', it is only now that attempts are being made to develop models specifically for pedagogic purposes. Consequently the taxonomies so far used for course design appear confused in this respect and, as Candlin (1976) points out, often contain categories which characterize the elements of discourse in quite different ways.

Despite this confusion, a consideration of the course designs currently available does reveal two distinct parameters used in the analysis of written discourse. The first involves categories of the type found in Wilkins (1973) and referred to as categories of 'communicative functions'. These categories relate the elements to the communicative operations they perform, and provide labels such as 'definition', 'classification', 'cause and effect' etc. The second parameter is particularly (though not exclusively, since elements of this approach are found in Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and others) associated with the rhetorical systems of American writers such as Kaplan, Pitkin and Christensen. Characteristic of their approach is the analysis of texts

predominantly in terms of how the utterances relate to each other within the framework of the discourse. Hence an element will be described as an 'introducer', a 'modifier', a 'developer', an 'intensifier', a 'particularization', a 'supporting statement' etc. Such labels might be said to characterize the element's 'rhetorical function'.

These two parameters, the communicative and the rhetorical, have been variously used as the basis for course design. Some writers, such as Cowie and Heaton (in experimental materials reported in Cowie and Heaton 1975) confine themselves to communicative functions. These may be arranged in arbitrary order, or grouped according to some other principle - Jones and Faulkner (1971) for example categorize functions according to the type of logical operation they are said to entail. Similar to this procedure in general course design would be to present functions grouped under the superordinate headings found in Wilkins (1973). This would result in blocs of units concerned with 'moral discipline and education', 'suasion', 'emotional relations' and the like.

Other textbooks, particularly those used to teach composition writing to freshmen of American universities (for example Buckler and Sklare 1966, Pichaske 1975) concentrate attention on rhetorical functions. Such books take either the paragraph or the essay as their primary unit, and deal with various rhetorical types - expository, argumentative, narrative, descriptive etc. These are characteristically further categorized for each type in terms of discourse positions - i.e. introductions, developments and conclusions.

Though for the purposes of exposition it may be useful to characterize existing textbooks as being either 'communicative' or 'rhetorical' in orientation, it is in fact quite rare to find examples which are exclusively the one or the other. More commonly, writing coursebooks either ignore the distinction or do not observe it consistently, utilizing categories of both types in arbitrary sequence. But clearly the possibility for a third course design does exist : one in which a systematic attempt is made to cover both communicative and rhetorical functions. Such an approach would first entail an analysis of texts specifying both the rhetorical and communicative functions of the constituent elements. As the next step in the production of a course design, one would then generalize over

a large number of texts to identify which communicative functions characteristically operate within which discourse positions. We might for example find that ' 'definitions' and 'classifications' occur most commonly in the introductions to pieces of expository prose, while 'contrasts' and 'comparisons' on the other hand are associated with developmental paragraphs. The feasibility of such a procedure would of course depend on the extent to which meaningful generalizations of this kind can be made - an issue to which we return in the last section of this paper. An approach somewhat akin to the one being described here, though not directed towards written English, is outlined in Riley (1976) which speaks of 'communicative' and 'discursive' levels of analysis. For written English Imhoof and Hudson's course design (1975) appears to move in the same direction.

A theoretical framework would, then, specify not only a set of ranks, but also the parameters in terms of which the analysis underlying course design would operate. Considering two such parameters - the communicative and the rhetorical - at least three approaches (we have seen) are possible and have to varying degrees of consistency been followed. The first concentrates attention on communicative functions only; the second on rhetorical functions only, while the third - based on an analysis of texts specifying the communicative and rhetorical functions of constituent elements - utilizes both parameters.

Section 2

Passing now to matters more directly concerned with pedagogy, it is clear that which of these three approaches is appropriate will depend on the specific aims of the course under consideration. In the case of the pre-sessional writing programme two aims are recognized as being particularly important. The first is to ensure that the student can recognize and produce exponents associated with the communicative functions most commonly found in academic writing; the second is to offer him practice in sequencing these functions to produce coherent discourse. Thus an appropriate course design would not only permit introduction of the relevant communicative functions; it would also have what might be called 'sequencing potential' - that is, the means for readily providing practice in linking the taught functions together to form larger

discourse units.

It is only really the third of the approaches described above which can adequately meet both these aims. A course design specified in communicative terms alone meets the aim of introducing and practising communicative functions. But this type of organization, if adopted exclusively, has little 'sequencing potential'. With each teaching unit either totally unrelated to the next, or related only in some 'abstract' way, providing practice in chaining functions together becomes difficult (though not of course impossible). The teaching units are arranged according to principles other than their potential to generate characteristic sequences and hence the organization itself does not facilitate this process.

The second type of course design, which focuses attention on rhetorical function, has on the other hand great sequencing potential. Hence its use in L_1 rhetorical handbooks whose main purpose is to concentrate on coherence. But such handbooks are for students who supposedly already know how to expound the various communicative functions, an assumption which cannot be made for foreign students. By de-emphasizing the importance of communicative function, this type of design fails to meet one aim of the pre-sessional writing programme.

One way in which the third approach might meet these aims would simply be by grouping communicative functions in the first instance according to the discourse positions, in ways which the prior analysis of texts would have identified as being characteristic. This might produce an organization in three parts, dealing with 'introductions', 'developments' and 'conclusions'. With each teaching unit covering one communicative function, such an organizadon would provide an adequate vehicle for introducing and practising each in isolation; but it would also have sequencing potential : once all the functions associated with 'introductions' (for example) have been taught, these may be practised linked together in characteristic permutations to form introductions to various types of discourse.

In this way the third approach is suited to the requirements of the pre-sessional writing course. But there is another criterion to be considered, according to which this design is less satisfactory. It is the criterion of what Wilkins (1974)

has called 'high surrender value'. A course is said to have 'high surrender value' if the effort the student invests in learning is quickly rewarded by high returns in ability to communicate. One way in which this may be achieved is by careful selection of the items to be taught. Hence a general justification of the functional or notional syllabus, as opposed to the conventional grammatical one, is that it yields only those areas of language use identified as being relevant to the students' language needs - rather than attempting to teach the entire language system. In this way it yields a quick return on time invested.

But there is a way in which a course may achieve what might be called 'high internal surrender value'. This is by judicious arrangement of materials within the course, to ensure that from an early point the student receives regular returns on his investment. If he has to wait until the end of the course before reaping the benefits of his effort, the design may be said to have low internal surrender value. A criticism sometimes levelled at the structural syllabus is that only when the programme is completed does the student have the linguistic tools at his disposal to use the language as he wishes. But this criticism may equally apply to a functionally organized syllabus. Hence in the first approach discussed in this paper, where communicative functions are arranged arbitrarily or according to some abstract principle, it is not until the end of the course that the student possesses the tools to produce the paragraphs and essays he wishes to write. With the functions arranged according to discourse positions - the third approach considered - the student is soon able to produce introductory, developmental and concluding paragraphs. But it is not until the end of the course that entire essays can be written, and to this extent the same criticism applies. Thus while these two syllabus designs may, through careful selection of the items to be taught, gain high external surrender value - in relation, that is, to designs for other courses of similar duration - their internal surrender value remains low.

The type of organization which would yield high internal surrender value would be one in which the design is made up of self-contained sets of units, each dealing with one discrete area of the required terminal behaviour. An alternative to the 'discourse position' approach, and in fact the one used as the basis for the

pre-sessional writing course, achieves this by making a initial categorization in terms of rhetorical type and topic. Table 1 illustrates the procedure undertaken. Relevant areas of discourse were analysed in the first place in terms of rhetorical type, the two main areas being descriptive or expository and argumentation. The second categorization is a subdivision of description according to discourse topic, yielding 'describing phenomena and ideas' on the one hand and 'describing processes' (the 'process analyses' of the rhetorical handbook) on the other. Further subcategorization then proceeds according to discourse position (i.e. introduction, development, conclusion). The organization therefore contains three self-contained sets of units, dealing with 'describing phenomena and ideas', 'describing processes' and 'argumentation'. As soon as the first has been covered (approximately a third of the way through the course) the student is in a position to produce essays of the relevant rhetorical type. In this way the design has high internal surrender value.

It is worth noting that apart from any general pedagogic justification for creating a course with high internal surrender value, there is a particular - and rather mundane - reason why the criterion is important for the pre-sessional writing course. It is that some of the students cannot attend the course for its duration. Working on the assumption that it is better to teach such students one small thing completely, rather than half a larger thing, a design made up of self-contained sets of units has distinct advantages.

In this section a number of criteria for the evaluation of writing course designs have been mentioned, and particular attention has been paid to two (related) criteria : sequencing potential and internal surrender value. These provide some justification for the approach outlined in Table 1.

Section 3

The validity of the proposed approach is based on two assumptions, both of which are open to challenge. The first is that the introductions, developments and conclusions to essays of each rhetorical type are sufficiently dissimilar to warrant separate treatment. The analysis of academic prose undertaken as a prelude to course design suggests that this is indeed the case. However,

there are (not surprisingly) certain areas where the functions associated with a discourse position are the same for each rhetorical type. It was found, for example that the concluding devices used for descriptions, process analyses and argumentation were often the same. In this situation a criterion of cost effectiveness, which would require concluding devices to be treated together in a bloc, conflicts with the criterion of high internal surrender value whereby such devices would be introduced at appropriate points throughout the course, thus making it possible for the students to write entire essays. In this particular case, and for the purposes of the draft edition, cost effectiveness was considered to be the more important criterion, and the concluding devices are introduced together in a bloc. The final course design, which includes a number of orientation units intended to introduce the student to the approach of the course, is shown in Table 2.

The second assumption concerns a fundamental question which has already been raised (for example in Candlin 1976) with relation to functional materials in general. It is to what extent norms can be prescribed. The aspect of this question most relevant here is the extent to which communicative functions can meaningfully be associated with certain discourse positions. In the model illustrated in Table 1, 'definitions' (for example) are included under 'introductions to descriptions of phenomena and ideas', a designation that may lead the student to believe either that such introductions must necessarily contain a definition, or that definitions cannot be found in other discourse positions connected with other rhetorical types - both statements being patently untrue.

The validity of the approach rests, then, on the assumption that characteristic sequences of communicative functions can be identified for specific rhetorical types and discourse positions. Such analysis of text as was undertaken in fact supports this assumption, as long as the word 'characteristic' is well stressed. This gives the approach an (admittedly small) degree of linguistic justification which, one might predict, the development of studies of the sort initiated by Kaplan on comparative rhetorical structures is likely eventually to reinforce. But by far the most important justification is pedagogic. The communicative

functions are arranged as they are mainly to provide a vehicle for the generation of longer stretches of discourse. Hence 'definitions', 'classifications' and what have been called 'identifications' are included under 'introducing descriptions of phenomena and ideas' simply because of their sequencing potential in that position. Any implication (at this early experimental stage) that the sequences thus generated have prescriptive value is to be eschewed.

An attempt to counteract the dangers of prescription has been made along two fronts. The first involves the so-called 'consolidation units', appearing in boxes in Table 2. Most of these units bear labels referring to discourse type and position, and one of their aims is to provide sequencing practice. Thus once the functions associated with 'developing an argument' have been dealt with discretely in units 23-5, unit 26 practises them chained together in various permutations. But an equally important aim of these consolidation units is to introduce functions other than those explicitly taught in the course, in a variety of permutations. In this way the student is exposed to functional sequences other than those which he has previously practised intensively.

The second means is concerned with the total structure of the pre-sessional writing programme of which the materials under discussion are only a part. It is a fundamental necessity of all syllabuses of the type which Wilkins (1976) has termed 'synthetic' - and the syllabus described here is of this sort - that they should be counterbalanced by considerable exposure to authentic texts which do not necessarily follow the norms selected for 'synthetic' teaching. For this reason the present writing course is eventually to be linked to the pre-sessional reading programme. Both will have a similar organization. Thus the reading programme will, for example, begin with descriptive and move on to argumentation texts. Each text studied will naturally provide examples of various communicative functions (only some of which will be covered in the writing course) sequenced in various ways. Follow-up exercises will draw attention to these various sequences and will make an explicit link between the writing and reading programmes.

The course design, therefore, does not imply any prescriptive status for the sequences it hopes to generate ; and any impression of prescription that the course

may give is counteracted in the consolidation units and through links with other areas of the pre-sessional programme.

Conclusion

Although the focus of attention in this paper has been a writing course, hopefully some of the issues touched upon have a more general relevance. Indeed, as Keith Morrow will indicate in a moment, several of the concepts referred to have been applied in other areas of the Centre's materials development.

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Communicative Syllabus Design for Written English

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1. Background: Pre-sessional language course
'Communicate in Writing: The English of Academic Study.'

2. Theoretical considerations:

   a. Specification of ranks.

   b. Specification of parameters.
   Survey of approaches using:

      1. 'Communicative' parameter only.

      2. 'Rhetorical' parameter only.

      3. Both parameters.

3. Some criteria for evaluating course designs:

   a. Clear introduction of communicative functions.

   b. 'Sequencing potential'.

   c. High internal surrender value.

   The three approaches assessed by these criteria.

4. Assumptions underlying the third approach:

   a. Dissimilarity of the rhetorical types/discourse positions.

   b. Association of functional sequences with each rhetorical type/discourse position.

DISCOURSE TYPE	DISCOURSE TYPE	DISCOURSE POSITION	EXAMPLE FUNCTIONS
Exposition	Describing phenomena and ideas.	Introduction	Defining, Classifying, Identifying
		Development	Contrasting Examplifying
		Conclusion	Summary
	Describing processes	Introduction	Describing purpose Describing means
		Development	Sequential description Instructions
		Conclusion	Summary Describing results
Argumentation	Argumentation	Introduction	Stating a proposition Stating assumptions
		Development	Induction Deduction Substantiation Concession
		Conclusion	Summary Generalization Speculation

TABLE 1

Table 2

A. Introductory units

	NUMBER OF UNITS
1. Functions, and types of discourse	1
2. Topic and comment / old and new information	1
3. Degrees of categoriality / the status and value of propositions	1
4. Cause and effect.	1
5. Reason, result, consequence.	1

B. Characterising phenomena and ideas.

6. Defining	2
7. Classifying	2
8. Identifying	1
9. Characterising phenomena and ideas	1

C. Describing phenomena and ideas

10. Contrasting and comparing	2
11. Exemplifying	2
12. Particularising, generalising, intensifying	1
13. Types of description statement.	1
14. Structuring a description	1

D. Introducing a process analysis

15. Purpose and means	1
16. Prediction and expectancy	1
17. Introducing a process analysis	1

	NUMBER OF UNITS
E. Developing a process analysis	
18. Sequential description	2
19. Issuing instructions	1
20. Describing a process analysis	1
F. [linking unit]	
21. Description and argumentation	1
G. Argumentation	
22. Introducing an argument	1
23. Substantiation	2
24. Modification	2
25. Implication	2
26. Developing an argument	1
H. Concluding	
27. Summarising	2
28. Drawing conclusions	2
29. Expressing personal view/assessment	1
30. Concluding a description or argument	1
TOTAL	40

40 units of one hour duration.